

The Word of God

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A few years ago, I was prompted to consider which are my favourite books by one of those silly challenges you get on Facebook. Trying to create that list made me realise that I really don't read a lot of fiction, and most of my favourite books are practical in nature. Maybe it's my short attention span but it seems I'm more likely to consider a reference book as a favourite than any of the classic literature. But there was something else that became obvious from thinking about my favourite books: none of them are the same kind of book as the Bible.

Let me tell you about three of my favourite books.

First up is the Lord of the Rings, and it is the only fiction book on the list. I actually first encountered Lord of the Rings through the 1981 BBC dramatisation, which my parents had on cassette. I listened through those cassettes multiple times before I ever read the book, and it remains my favourite work of fiction. The book is problematic in many ways. It is over long, the dialogue can be convoluted, and characters burst into song repeatedly. But actually these characteristics are all part of its charm. Tolkien didn't want to write a novel – he wanted to write mythic history. And maybe that's why it appeals to me. On the plus side, it is full of wise words, it has a strong moral focus, and the principal narrative turns upon the idea a single act of mercy can reverse the fortunes of the world.

The Bible isn't like this. Whilst the Bible contains many stories, it is not itself a story. There is no central character, no single narrative arc. Whilst one can trace themes from Genesis through to Revelation, the Bible lacks a unified narrative structure. Indeed given that the order of the books in our Bible differs from that in the Jewish scriptures, it would be somewhat arbitrary to expect a sequential narrative running through the Bible. This just underlines the point that the Bible is not a book – it is a library of books. It is also not a story. It is something else.

Second on my list is *Unto This Last*, written by John Ruskin. I bought a copy of it following a tour of his house. The title is a quote from the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard, where

the master says to the workers, *I will give unto this last, even as unto thee.*¹ This is an essay – one could hardly call it a book in its own right – that attempts to expose the essential problems with free-market capitalism. The main point of the essay is that it is problematic to equate *value* and *worth* with the *price the market will bear*. It interests me because I am interested in big ideas, like philosophy and politics. But it is one of my favourites because of the eloquence with which it is written, and the intellectual incisiveness with which it diagnoses the flaw at the heart of capitalism. Plus it is short.

The Bible isn't like this book either. The Bible isn't a single treatise on one core topic. It isn't even a collection of essays bound together in a single volume. There are bits of the Bible that focus on a specific topic for a while. Romans devotes a lot of space to the question of how Jews and Gentiles can both be the people of God. Hebrews focuses on how the new covenant in Jesus is better than the old. But most of the Bible isn't like that. There are plenty of really important topics we might like addressed in a similarly concentrated form that aren't addressed that way in the Bible.

The third book I'd like to introduce you to is the Flavour Thesaurus. This is a fantastic book for any creative cook. If you like to cook from recipes then this book isn't for you. But I don't like to cook that way. I quite often just take whatever we have and make something up, and this book is perfect for helping me do that. What it does is matches up ingredients with other ingredients that complement it. So you can pick, say, eggs and get a list of other ingredients and flavours that work well with eggs and so build up an idea for a new recipe. Like any thesaurus, this isn't a book that you'd read cover-to-cover (well, I suppose you might but it's not intended to be read that way). This is a reference book, something you look at when you looking for something specific. It is a really interesting way of exploring food, developing new ideas, and gaining new information.

And the Bible isn't like this either. I don't just mean that the Bible isn't a recipe book. I mean it isn't a book where you can match topics together, or easily find connections between two different ideas. The Bible isn't structured in such a way to allow you to start with one topic and then match up with other topics. The Bible itself has no reference section, or index, or key. That might sound like an obvious point but think how useful that would be. The fact that we have

¹ Matthew 20:14

created concordances and dictionaries and study bibles to help us navigate the Bible, highlights that the Bible itself is not structured in this way. The Bible is not a reference book.

Those are just three examples. Books that I happen to like, or at least find useful, but books that are also nothing like the Bible. And you might think, “so what?” After all, the Bible never claims to be a novel or an essay or a reference book, so what’s the problem? The point is that these three books I’ve cited are accessible. They are accessible in different ways, and for different things, but they are each accessible for the purpose they are trying to achieve. And the Bible isn’t like any one of them.

The Bible is actually quite unique in that it is a library of books, with many different genres, styles, and structures, from different authors, centuries, and contexts. All of that complexity and diversity is wonderful. But does that make it accessible? Does the Bible make it easy to answer life’s big questions? Does it make it easy to find moral guidance? Does it make it easy to build and strengthen your relationship with God? Or actually, does the Bible often seem to be inaccessible, irrelevant, or even, sometimes, boring?

What I want to suggest is that the Bible needs a key to help unlock it. It needs a lens to bring it into focus. It needs a compass by which to orient yourself in it.

And, if you haven’t guessed already, I am going say that key is Jesus.

Word of God

If you look at the use of the phrase the “word of God” in the Bible, and the synonymous phrase “the word of the LORD”, you will discover something interesting. There is no unequivocal usage of the phrase “word of God” to refer to the Bible itself. The collected scriptures are never called the “word of God” in the scriptures. In the Old Testament, the phrase “the word of the LORD” is used primarily of the message received and conveyed by a prophet (e.g. *the word of the LORD came to Isaiah ...*) but never, it seems, of the scriptures as a whole.

In the New Testament the phrase “the word of God” is used primarily of the gospel message. For example, Luke describes Jesus as teaching the “word of God”; in Acts, we find the Gentiles receiving and accepting the “word of God”; and so on. But, as in the Old Testament, the phrase the “word of God” is never, unequivocally, used of the written word. It is never used of the scriptures themselves.

Now, obviously the Bible contains both the prophetic messages and the gospel message, so the Bible contains the “word of God” in both these senses. Therefore, you may think this is purely semantic distinction to say that the Bible is not called the “word of God”. If the Bible conveys the word of God, does it matter that it is not explicitly called that?

Well, I think it does matter.

Calling the Bible the “word of God” might give the impression that it is the words that are important, that the written text has authority. But that’s not the Biblical usage. Biblically, it is *the message* that it is the “word of God”.

What is the true revelation of God? Is it the written texts? Or is it the message they contain?

Jesus

Whilst the Bible never calls the Bible the “word of God”, there is one in the scriptures who is called the “word of God”, and that is Jesus.

I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and wages war. His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself. He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God. The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean. Coming out of his mouth is a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. “He will rule them with an iron scepter.” He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty. (Rev 19:11-15)

This passage seems to describe the second coming of Jesus. Remember all of this is symbolic, so let’s not get hung up about literal flying horses. This isn’t describing what will actually happen when Christ returns, it is showing us the symbolic significance. This rider has many names: he is *Faithful and True*, he has *a name that no ones knows but he himself*, he is the *King of Kings and Lord of Lords*. But importantly for our purposes here, he is named “the Word of God”.

Some commentators make the connection with Hebrews 4, where the word of God is said to be sharper than any two-edged sword, perhaps like the sword coming out of Christ’s mouth in Revelation. In doing so, they would see overtones of the judgment in both passages. But I think

there is something bigger going on here. In this passage the author of Revelation is laying out the qualifications of this rider: He has many crowns; he has the secret name; his robes are dipped in blood; and he is also the Word of God. This is the authority of the coming King, the authority of one to whom the judgment has been committed, he is the very Word of God.

To unpick that a bit further I think we need to go to John 1. Here we find the Word, the Logos, that was with God in the beginning and was God. We sometimes get hung up on this chapter because it is a favoured proof text of Trinitarians, but it is not a Trinitarian text at all. In fact, the first part of this chapter says nothing that a first century Jew would disagree with. A first century Jew would know about the figure of Wisdom from Proverbs and would know about the books from the period between the testaments where Wisdom is also called Word. Such a Jew would agree that Wisdom was with God in the beginning, would agree that all things were created through Wisdom. Such a Jew would have seen Wisdom as dwelling with the Israelites in the wilderness, being embodied in the Law and the Prophets. The controversial bit comes in verse 14 where this Word becomes flesh, becomes manifest in the person of Jesus.

That bit was going too far. But John explains what he is on about:

No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him. (John 1:18, NKJV)

The Word makes God known. Just as our speech reveals things about us, Jesus makes God known. Jesus is the way God declares himself to us.

And if John 1 feels a bit too abstract for your tastes, John makes this same point another way later in his gospel.

Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really know me, you will know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him." (John 14:6-7)

Jesus says to that know him is to know the Father. If you want to know about God, you just get to know Jesus. In fact, Philip does want to know more. He says, *Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us.* And Jesus replies,

Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. (John 14:9)

Jesus says that Philip already has everything he needs. He doesn't need to be shown the Father because he knows Jesus. And this same point is made throughout John's gospel. The Son manifests the Father.

Traditionally Christadelphians have used the language of "theophany" – of God-manifestation – to try and explain those passages which ascribe a high level of divinity to Jesus. Sometimes that language sounds a bit technical or abstract, because who talks about "manifestation" in everyday English? But manifestation just means showing, and the answer to Philip's question tells us all we really need to know about the topic of theophany: Jesus shows us God.

This is what I think it means for Jesus to be the Word of God. He is God's final and perfect revelation. Jesus is the one who makes God known.

John says, no-one has seen God at any time, but Jesus has made him known. And if that is true then Jesus, as the Word of God, takes precedence over every prior revelation, takes precedence over every previous prophet, takes precedence over the scriptures themselves. Jesus takes the crown as God's most perfect revelation.

It may sound peculiar to put it in those terms, to think of one taking precedence over the other, but it is surely not disputable that this should be the case. That Jesus should come first above all others. And because Jesus is God's ultimate revelation, then Jesus can be that for us – to help us understand scriptures.

Seeing the Bible through Jesus

At this point, someone might raise an obvious objection: since almost everything we know about Jesus comes from the Bible, how can Jesus have priority over the scriptures? It could be argued that the scriptures must have priority because they are our primary source of information about Jesus. And, of course, that much is true. There is only a small amount of historical information about Jesus outside the New Testament, so we are dependent on the Bible itself for our information about what Jesus did, what he said, and who he was and is. We need the Bible to tell us about Jesus.

But I would make three points by way of response.

Firstly, whilst it is true that the scriptures are our source of information about Jesus, there is much else in the Bible besides. The Bible was written by many different authors, who wrote at

different times, in different contexts, and for different reasons. The Bible speaks with and through many voices. To properly do justice to what the Bible has to say, we have to recognise those differing voices and differing messages.

For example, Deuteronomy says there are blessings for the righteous and curses for the wicked, and the first Psalm says that righteous prosper whilst the wicked perish. But also, Ecclesiastes says time and chance happen to us all, the book of Job argues that not all suffering is a punishment for wickedness, and Jesus says that God causes the rain to fall on the just and unjust alike.

All of these messages, and others besides, are written within the Bible, and on the face of it they may appear contradictory. Anyone reading the Bible has to find a way to make sense of those different voices and do justice to what they are saying. The most appropriate way – and this should not be a controversial point for Christians – is to understand those different voices through Jesus.

Secondly, whilst what we know of Jesus comes through the Bible, there is a difference between focusing *on the person of Jesus* and focusing on the scriptural *record about Jesus*. Traditionally Christadelphians have put a lot of emphasis on the significance of individual words, seeing each and every word as having a special significance. I see a danger in that. Partly because it treats the Bible as a sort of code that needs to be deciphered, and thereby implies that God is most interested in people who can crack that code. That is, at best, misleading. Also, I think there is a danger that overemphasising the significance of words and meanings of words obscures the person and character of Jesus, which is where I see the true revelation of God.

The compassion of Jesus, for example, shines through in the gospel narratives. We don't need to over-examine what words are used. The truth of Jesus' character is evident.

We don't need a statement or command saying "act in compassionate ways" – we have the very character of Jesus to follow. Seeing that character should have very obvious implications for how we should live, and think. And how we should read the rest of the Bible. If Jesus was (is) compassionate, and if Jesus is the ultimate revelation of who God is, then we should also be compassionate, and we should read the Bible looking for that aspect of God's character throughout the text.

Thirdly, whilst it is true that most of what we know about the first century Jesus is contained within the New Testament, I think we need to be open to the living Lord Jesus today. Jesus said:

For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them (Matt 18:20)

Jesus also said:

And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age. (Matt 28:20)

There are other passages we could cite, but I won't. The point is that the New Testament is clear that Jesus is alive and available today. And we need to open to what that might mean for us, including the possibility that it might influence the way we read the scriptures. If that sounds incredibly difficult and challenging, well, good – it is – but it is something we can't ignore.

What does this mean in practice?

But what does any of this mean? What does it mean to interpret the Bible with Jesus as our key? Let us take one passage as a test case. This is what Deuteronomy says about war.

When you march up to attack a city, make its people an offer of peace. If they accept and open their gates, all the people in it shall be subject to forced labor and shall work for you. If they refuse to make peace and they engage you in battle, lay siege to that city. When the Lord your God delivers it into your hand, put to the sword all the men in it. As for the women, the children, the livestock and everything else in the city, you may take these as plunder for yourselves. And you may use the plunder the Lord your God gives you from your enemies. This is how you are to treat all the cities that are at a distance from you and do not belong to the nations nearby.

However, in the cities of the nations the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, do not leave alive anything that breathes. Completely destroy them – the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites – as the Lord your God has commanded you. (Deut 20:10-17)

Let me briefly summarise what Deuteronomy is saying. First, it is not commandment about self-defence or the last resort when diplomatic means have ended. The passage presupposes that the nation of Israel will have enemies that they want to attack. It is also not about occupying the land of Canaan – different rules apply there. This passage is about attacking a city because you want to conquer it.

When the Israelites decided that they wanted to conquer that city, well the people already living there had a choice: either they could be enslaved or they could be attacked. If the Israelites

attacked, then once the city was captured all the men were to be killed, but everything else in that city, including the women and children, were to be plunder for the Israelites. Let's repeat that.

The women and children were plunder. They were property to be taken away and kept and used.

The next chapter goes on to say that if an Israelite was attracted to one of the women that they had taken as plunder, then they could marry them – of course, that woman doesn't get a say in the matter – and, if after being married, that Israelite decides that he doesn't like her after all, he can just send her away. There is one big exception to all of this: those nations already dwelling in the land of Canaan. In those cases, you don't offer them peace or enslave the women and children. Instead, everything that breathes, the text says, is to be killed.

Now passages like this are really, really, challenging.

They are really hard to deal with. However, we shouldn't tuck them under the carpet, or ignore, or pretend like they are not challenging. I don't think we should make simplistic excuses for them, saying "well, maybe being taken captive and treated as plunder isn't so bad".

The truth is that we don't agree with this sort of behaviour. We think this sort of behaviour is wrong. Unequivocally wrong.

If I told you about a group of people that was going round, attacking cities, killing all the men and taking everyone else as slaves, you'd probably assume I was taking about ISIS or some other terrorist group. Yet here, in Deuteronomy, this behaviour is permitted as part of the scriptures.

Arguably, the biggest reason why we don't agree with the sort of behaviour described in Deuteronomy is because of Jesus. He models for us a better standard of behaviour:

Can you imagine the one who said *those who live by the sword will die by the sword* advocating war and conquest against neighbouring cities?

Can you imagine the one who said that he had come *to proclaim liberty to the captives* advocating that an entire city be put in the slavery?

Can you imagine the one who said *love your enemies* advocating the massacre of every male resident of a city, even an enemy city?

Can you imagine the one who took women as his disciples, and as some of his closest followers – can you imagine him advocating the forced marriage of women whose husbands you've just slain in battle?

Can you imagine the one who drew the little children to him, the one who said if that *anyone who causes a child to stumble it would be better if he had a milestone tied round his neck and he was thrown into the sea*, can you imagine him advocating the slavery of children captured in war?

Can you imagine the one who found faith amongst the Gentiles, greater faith than in Israel, advocating the indiscriminate slaughter of entire nations?

The truth is we can't imagine Jesus doing any of those things. That is not the Jesus we read about in the gospels.

You might say: "yes but what about the second coming – there'll be some warfare then, right?" At the beginning, we referred to Revelation 19 – Christ riding on a white horse. That's a very different side of Jesus, right?

Well, look again.

This is a book of symbol. If Jesus isn't going to be riding a literal horse at the second coming, why we would think the sword or the battle was literal either?

Look at what the text actually says. Yes, the white rider has his robes dipped in blood, but that is *before* the battle. So whose blood is it? Not the blood of his enemies. The blood is his own. The blood of the Lamb who was slain.

That is how Jesus conquers, not through shedding the blood of others but by the conquest made in his blood. And what about that sword? He is not wielding the sword in his hand, but the sword is coming out of his mouth. This is the one who conquers by his words. Yes, there is a judgment coming. Yes, Jesus means to change the world. But that coming king and judge is the same Jesus who called the little children to him. The same who wept for those who suffered.

Balancing the Book

So what do we do with a book like the Bible? What do we do with a book that speaks with many voices about God? What do we do with a book – a library of books – that says some things that we would never do and cannot agree with?

I know it may sound stark, it may sound challenging, to present such a dramatic contrast between passages in the Old Testament and the person of Jesus. But whilst it is challenging, I think it's a challenge we are already aware of and, in some sense, have already found a way to live with. Because, I suspect, none of you advocate the forced slavery of entire cities, or the forced

marriage of those you've enslaved. You already give Jesus, the Word of God, the pre-eminence in the way you live your faith and the way you read your Bible.

The solution, or at least part of the solution, to making sense of the Bible is to acknowledge that Jesus is the Word of God, the final revelation of God, the truest revelation of God.

The solution is to read the scriptures through the lens of Christ, and to read the scriptures as being on a trajectory that points to Christ. War and conquest are not okay. They are not things that Christians should aspire to. But the Israelites, as exhorted in Deuteronomy, had to adopt limits on some of the excesses of war, limits that moved them beyond the morality of their own day. If you wanted to capture an enemy city, you had to offer them to terms of peace first. If you captured a city, the civilians, the women and children, were to be protected and not killed. If you took one of those captured women as a wife, you had to first allow her a full month to grieve her former life. And if you divorced her, she did not return to slavery but she was now free.

These positive aspects do not legitimise the moral standards found in Deuteronomy. But they do point upwards towards a higher standard, where peace is preferred to war, where the life of even your enemy is valued. Where it is recognised even your worst enemy will be touched by grief and sorrow. And where a woman, even a captive woman, has certain rights that are to be respected.

Whilst Deuteronomy points us to that higher standard, it hadn't reached that level yet. Jesus had not yet been revealed. But by reading these passages in the light of Jesus, we can see an upward trajectory from barbarity and inhumanity, moving towards the true character of God as expressed in Jesus.

The Bible doesn't speak with one voice – the Bible isn't all the same – but read through the lens of Jesus we can see a progression upwards, towards the full glory of God.

Summary

So the Bible isn't like a novel. The Bible isn't like an essay or treatise. The Bible isn't like a reference book. The Bible is, actually, difficult. We need to think about what we expect the Bible to be, and maybe lay those expectations aside. We need to let the Bible be what it is.

But the Bible is not the only way that God speaks to us. We have a revelation that is accessible, that does speak to us, that is alive. We have the Word of God, Jesus Christ. Setting our focus upon Jesus can help us make sense of the rest.